

Interview with Elvira Johnson (Elfie) Elbrick

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Spouse Oral History Series

ELVIRA "ELFIE" ELBRICK

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Saturday, October 25, 1986. I am recording an introduction to an interview I did yesterday with Elfie Elbrick, Mrs. C. Burke Elbrick, at her home 2137 R Street, NW, just off of Sheridan Circle. Mrs. Elbrick lives in an absolutely marvelous Georgian Revival townhouse [See Dupont Circle House Tour brochure for October, 1989.]. When I approached the house there was an elderly man waiting for me just outside the entry way. Mrs. Elbrick told me that he had joined her staff in Cuba in 1949 and had been taking care of her ever since. They spoke Spanish to one another.

The house was imposing, four stories — I had a quick tour of the downstairs before the interview — an expansive living room absolutely filled with lovely antiques, and in the dining room a table which Mrs. Elbrick said had belonged to Mary Todd Lincoln. Behind the little seating area where we had our interview was a signed photograph of John F. Kennedy. Mrs. Elbrick's husband had a distinguished career with the Foreign Service, from 1932 until the mid-seventies.

As the interview with Mrs. Elbrick began, Miss Jennings entered the house, and Mrs. Elbrick invited her to sit in, adding that Miss Jennings had come to her for three weeks when the Elbrick's son was born and had stayed forty-six years.

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1989 Addendum: In 1988, Mrs. Elbrick moved to a retirement home. I happened to walk by the R Street house one afternoon, when the estate sale was in progress. I went in, primarily to have a final look at the stately proportions of the public rooms, and came away with four of the colorful hats Mrs. Elbrick was noted for during her Foreign Service career. I also acquired a pair of white kid gloves, with numerous dry cleaner's marks, and a copy of the 1970 Washington Social Register. These items are now the property of the Foreign Service Family Oral History Project, and were on display at the Project's 1988 Benefit Tea held at DACOR House in October. Mrs. Elbrick's file at Georgetown University's Lauinger Library contains a photo of Mrs. George Shultz modeling one of the hats at the Benefit Tea.

ELBRICK: (To Miss Jennings, who had just entered the house).

Well, come on in and sit in on this. You have been most of the places I have. Miss Jennings is a registered nurse. She came for three weeks and stayed forty-six years. She helped deliver my son in a hospital here. And then she said, "What are you going to do with this little baby?" I said, "I want to go back to Poland." Here are your first questions. You have your system, because if you get me started I never stop, I assure you.

Q: Wonderful, wonderful. That's exactly what I had in mind.

ELBRICK: I don't know whether I think it's better to mix it up a bit. Doesn't that seem more...well, you know, a comedy, a tragedy...

Q: The leit motif and the heavy...But, if we could go back to Brazil. That must have been your most frightening experience, as you just said. Was your husband, if I remember correctly, the first kidnap victim of modern times — of the modern terrorism — if that's what we can call it?

ELBRICK: Yes, he was the first Ambassador of any nationality.

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Q: And that was in Rio, in what year?

ELBRICK: Let me see, I can't really remember, it's awful. It was 1971.

Q: 1971, fifteen years ago. Was that at the same time when Curt Cutter was ambushed in [Porto Alegre]?

ELBRICK: Well, it all started...we were in Yugoslavia five and a half years and we were delighted to go to Brazil. We had never been in South America, always in Europe. So we thought, "Oh, this is wonderful after being in a communist country to go to carnivals in Copacabana and meet the Brazilians, an interesting continent. We had just arrived, we'd been there 57 days and hadn't even unpacked all of our suitcases, but we had a very busy life as everybody does from the juniors on up to the seniors. When you first arrive you're very busy. So we were having our first lunch together without having...one day the Secretary of Commerce came down, the former Secretary of the Treasury — this is one day in Rio shortly after we arrived the first week we were there. So Burke had a breakfast for the Director of the Budget and then Morris — is that his name? I can't remember — the Secretary of Commerce, and the former Secretary of the Treasury. And they flew to Brasilia and a luncheon, all the first day. Then we tore back to Rio and we had an enormous reception for the Secretary of Commerce and the former Secretary of the Treasury — a reception but they didn't speak to each other and so we had to divide the reception and have 300 in one room and 200 in the other and keep them separated because they were deadly enemies. The Secretary of Commerce had wanted the job at Treasury and that's how it all happened and they didn't jive with one another. So we kept them separated. Then we had a huge dinner that very night for both men — I think we were 92 and we had it in the garden. This was sandwiched in between — the luncheon in Brasilia took us two hours to fly up and two hours to fly back so the day was absolutely jammed to capacity with the big reception followed by the dinner in the garden.

Q: And the luncheon in Brasilia.

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ELBRICK: ...and the luncheon in Brasilia with the Foreign Minister and the breakfast in Rio. So it was really some day. About a week later we were still with our tongues hanging out from exhaustion with so much going on and Burke heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Isn't this wonderful? We can have lunch together alone," on one of the many terraces — a huge house, twice the size of the White House painted pink, 23 servants in the house and 12 Marines. Enormous. A number of people slept in our house plus all the guests so we were never alone and this was a great day, we had a free lunch. We had a very pleasant lunch together. And one of the butlers came in and said, "There are a lot of photographers and press in the foyer downstairs." Burke said, "I don't want to..." because they kept plaguing us, needling Burke to be interviewed. He hated publicity. And I said, "Oh, Burke, they've come again, they have to make their own living. Do go down for about ten minutes to talk with them and they'll just splash a picture — just say 'hello' to them, 'and how are you, and how are your children, your wife' and then you can get in your car and go to your office."

So he did, and I went downstairs to help put on a big bazaar that all the diplomatic missions in Brazil were putting on to raise money for the poor. We had a booth, it was all new to me, it wasn't my idea but it had been done before. We had 311 pairs of Levis in the basement of the house, cupcakes — heaven knows how many of those — and Revlon products, that's what the Americans were going to sell in their booth. Each nation sold...like the National Cathedral here. So that was our booth. I went down to help tag with an assortment of ladies in the Embassy — 20 at a time would come for a couple of hours throughout the day. We all worked together.

Suddenly my secretary came downstairs and I said, "Don't disturb me because I'm tagging these Levis and I've got cupcake frosting on my fingers, and I'll be up later. What's the matter?" "No, no, it's very urgent. It's an emergency." So I said, "All right." So I went upstairs and she said, "Your husband has just been kidnaped." And I said, "What! We just had lunch together." I said, "When?" And she said, "About three minutes after he

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entered his limousine to go back to his office.” He was caught on a side street, intercepted by a Volkswagen, and they dragged the chauffeur out of the limousine and tore out the telephone, put a tarpaulin on Burke in the back of the car, and two of them with rifles at his neck, and the chauffeur was squeezed — he was very tiny, a Portuguese chauffeur, very small — had to sit on the cushion to drive this big Cadillac limousine. So they pushed him into the middle and one got behind the wheel and the other one by the door beside the chauffeur and said, “Go.” Burke was pushed to the floor and as I said, with a tarpaulin over his head. So then they went on and on and on for quite a long time — close to two hours — and later Burke told me that he had read enough of Agatha Christie and Alfred Hitchcock to know that sometimes by hearing you could judge where you were going by the sounds that you heard — the general direction. So a tunnel, or a mountain, or a flat area, he could feel the automobile moving — a hollow space like a tunnel he remembered particularly — the sound was very different. So he was able later when he was liberated to guide the...well, they'd discovered where he was in the meantime, where he had been incarcerated. They examined, with Burke present, where he was up in a shack in the mountains and he led them exactly because of the sounds. So anyway it was just a very short time that they kept him — it was just five days and six nights.

Q: But it didn't seem short at the time, I'm sure.

ELBRICK: Well, I was in...I don't know...a daze I think and I never asked for television or radio and they took them out and I didn't even notice they were missing. I carried on, I had people in as usual and carried on with my life as best I could. But I was amazed...oh, they called from all over the world, The London Times, and the Paris Soire, Roma or whatever in Italy, I've forgotten all of these [newspapers]. And I thought it was my children so I went to the telephone because they were in Europe, both of them, one was in the mountains of Montenegro doing a film with Mel Brooks and they couldn't reach her for three days. My son was in London. So I rushed to the telephone and then the newspaper people would say, “What kind of toothpaste did you use when you went to bed last night?” and “What

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color nightgown?” and “What kind of a breakfast did you have, and did you sleep, and what did you do in the meantime?” The most ridiculous questions.

Q: Really an intrusion on your personal life.

ELBRICK: The questions they asked I just couldn't believe. So, of course, we got a telephone operator, three I think because calls came in from all over. So finally he was liberated by the Brazilian...oh, Nixon gave an order — he was the one who appointed Burke — when Burke was kidnapped he gave an order to the State Department, Rogers at that time, and the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon, and the White House, were to lay off the Elbrick case because he didn't want America to be involved with Brazilian terrorism and revolutionaries and therefore they were not to do anything to help liberate Burke. [The late Sheldon T. Mills, former DCM in Rio de Janeiro, maintains efforts were made to secure Elbrick's release. Mrs. Elbrick, apparently, was never informed.]

Q: This came from President Nixon?

ELBRICK: This was President Nixon's orders. So there wasn't a word. I wasn't phoned, I didn't get a letter from the President. I thought at least he would call and say, “How would you like your children, I'll send a plane for them.” I would have said, “No, that I didn't want them to be involved in this in case they blew up the house or did something crazy because you never know what they're going to do.” But nothing, no word. Admiral Moore, who was Chief of Naval Operations happened to be in Panama, and he offered a plane to get my children and bring them and I said, “No, I think they are better off where they are and I can manage.” (I smoke incessantly, I'll punctuate for the record.) At first, of course, he offered to take me out and I said, “No, I'll stay for a while until we get news.” Anyway, he was wonderful but I said, “No, thank you.”

The Brazilian government for some unknown reason other than they thought it was very strange that the United States President had not done anything to help this man, innocent victim, 57 days in the country who knew nothing about Brazilian politics or terrorism —

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he hadn't had time to be briefed you see, in that short a period under two months — so anyway the Brazilian government for some unknown reason took pity on Burke and they surrendered to the wishes of the revolutionary which was against their principles because it was the same thing exactly as in Persia five or six years ago when all that happened at our Embassy there, Khomeini and the students. So the revolutionaries were against the government and it was very demeaning for the Brazilian government, a military junta — a general was president — to surrender to the wishes of the revolutionaries to liberate this American. But they did it and they required 15 leaders of pockets of revolutionaries and Brazil, being an enormous country, it was very hard to find them, to get them out and they knew they wouldn't liberate Burke until...and these were the demands. That was the ransom to get these leaders and it was very, very hard to find them and this took time. But finally they did and they went to...I've forgotten where they went, I think they went to Saudi Arabia, some of them — there were 15 anyway — and a few went to Mexico. They are all dead except two, well that's another story I'll tell you about that just recently came to my view. This man wants to interview me who was one of the leaders of Burke's kidnaping who is now free and going into politics in Brazil. He has filtered back to his country, had been living in Sweden — I've forgotten, some other...I think France and had a book written about Burke and he was the one that opened the door of the shack to say, "Hello comrade, who have you got there?" And they said, "It's the American Ambassador." This was the man who wrote the book who is now in politics in Rio and wants to be governor of Rio. (Brizola)

Q: Do you remember his name?

ELBRICK: I've got it upstairs. I don't remember and I must get it right because it's a well known name. But he has made a fortune with this book about the incident because there's a new government so he was able to get back to his country and he then made a movie with Cary Grant, who doesn't look like Burke at all, about the kidnaping of this American. And now he's in politics. It's really rather funny. But in any case Burke came back to the United States nine days after he was liberated and at his own expense brought me; had

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an appointment at the White House to see the Chief of State to give him the story direct. He went to the White House, he was led into the White House in the direction of the Oval Office, and then was told that the President was un-available. Nixon. So Burke said, "I'm not going to anybody else. I was going to our President who appointed me." So he went back to Brazil and he stayed nine months feeling very, very sick because...I forgot to tell you he was horribly beaten, had 75 stitches taken in his head. And they were opening up the Foreign Office in Brasilia, Burke had to go to all those ceremonies in white tie and tails and so on, and he was feeling dizzy and faint and I remember he was hanging on to the car door and I thought, "My God, what's the matter with this man?" And this was a clot which had formed in his jugular vein which our Embassy doctor did not discover but he had stitched him up and said, he needed some rest and "...you'll be all right." This was causing the fainting spells. Then Burke appealed to the State Department that he should come home and have a medical examination and he had ten operations, one each year. They removed that thing which was the size of a Kennedy dollar from his jugular vein from the blow on his head. There were nine other operations and the last two were his legs, removed from his hips, and he lived for two years and then he got pneumonia and he died. He got a cold from one of his grandsons on Easter Sunday in Chevy Chase, where we had a family reunion and one of the little boys who went up and kissed his grandfather had a cold and Burke got the cold because he wasn't too well so I suppose could catch colds more easily than the normal person.

Q: So he never really, truly recovered.

ELBRICK: ...Wednesday, and Sunday he was at the Chevy Chase Club and that was the end of Burke.

Q: He never really recovered from that kidnaping.

ELBRICK: No, no.

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Q: Did the President ever see him?

ELBRICK: No, but I got even with Nixon about three weeks ago. I'd been lying in wait like a three headed serpent and a six-pronged tongue viper. I saw him at Loy Henderson's funeral. He'd come from New York at taxpayers expense — now he denies it, maybe you heard it on the radio, I mean television, using guards at the expense of the taxpayer but at that time, I think, everybody knew then — this happened just last week that he decided not to have guards that he doesn't pay out of his own pocket. So he was at the funeral and I didn't see him because it was packed — maybe you were there?

Q: No, because I didn't know about it.

ELBRICK: Well, we knew Loy fairly well and I went because Burke was devoted to him and I wanted to go. Somebody poked me and said, "There's Nixon standing at the foot of the church steps," a little church on Sixteenth Street, a Methodist Church. So I went up to him and I said, "How do you do, Mr. President?" And he said, "How do you do," and smiled from one ear lobe to the other. And I said, "And how is Mrs. Nixon?" and he said, "Fine," "...and, the children and so on", just a very quick little conversation. And then I said, "Do you happen to recall a man by the name of Burke Elbrick?" And he said, "Oh, yes. I appointed him as Ambassador to Brazil." And I said, "Do you remember that he was kidnaped down there and that you were his Judas and his Pontius Pilate?" And I said, "Goodbye, Mr. Watergate," and walked away. And that was the end of that. Of course, he probably never would even remember the scratch I gave him but at least I felt good for it.

Q: Good for you, good for you.

ELBRICK: So that's a good story.

Q: That's quite a story, really.

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ELBRICK: But I don't think you ought to go into kidnaping really. I mean it's so long ago so I'm going to think what happens to all the others.

Q: I guess your situation was just the very first time that anyone had dealt with it.

ELBRICK: But it was very difficult because...yes, then we'd go to communion and church — we happened to be Roman Catholic, I'm a very bad one, Burke was a very good one. We'd go to church on Sundays surrounded by — oh, the Brazilians put nine guards and then we had our own Marines and private guards that we really didn't feel we needed at all, but we had them. The Brazilian government couldn't have been more wonderful about guarding our lives. We would go to communion at church and people would take pictures of us and then the guards would get trigger happy with a camera close to Burke and they didn't know whether it might be a bomb or something. We couldn't go anywhere — I couldn't go to the bathroom in my own house at night, or roll over in bed with Burke that the guards weren't at the door and they knew exactly whether we were asleep or awake and whatever we did was just public knowledge. It was unpleasant because nobody had guards at that time and everywhere we went they'd lean out of buses and take pictures. We couldn't go to a beach, we couldn't do anything. We couldn't be private even in our own house, it was awful.

Q: It makes you wonder why people crave fame, doesn't it?

ELBRICK: They want to be a celebrity.

Q: No, you really don't.

ELBRICK: Well, it's all water over the dam but it wasn't pleasant. I don't think I really absorbed it at the time, it's sort of like a death, a little bit worse because death...I remember thinking I'd rather know that Burke was dead than...the fear of the unknown was the worst.

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Q: Right, it would be the worst, it would be, yes.

ELBRICK: I mean the bed was opened at night and the dogs slept on his bed and the bed was empty, and not knowing whether he'd been beaten or not beaten, or treated well or bad or what. And I began to think I would rather hear that he was dead and not suffering wherever he was because they tortured him and they beat him terribly. They put him in front of an electric light bulb in a garage with a white wall on a three-legged stool all night long that first night — he was taken at 10 minutes past 3:00 after lunch and it went on all night long. They gave him a book of Ho Chi Minh to read.

Q: Oh, so they weren't questioning him or anything?

ELBRICK: Yes, they questioned him all night long while he was bleeding because they bandaged his eyes as he got out of the car. They put a kerchief around his eyes and he pushed them away and pushed the thing off his eyes and he felt they were going to shoot him on the spot. He didn't know what they were going to do, so he resisted which he shouldn't have done. That's when they beat him terribly on the head. So he was all night long being quizzed about nothing that he could answer. He knew nothing about the country. But then in the end they dumped him on a mountain top and said, "Stay 15 minutes by your watch,"...they gave him back his watch. They washed his clothes but didn't return his tie, and then they shook his hand.

He spoke fluent Portuguese, which was in his favor, with the men in this shack and a man sat on the floor all the time, they rotated and let him go to the bathroom and that was about it — a cot, a table and a chair, and a paperback of Ho Chi Minh to read and gave him revolutionary food. The second day they gave him nothing. But they began to treat him all right really and then he could communicate. He said, "Why do you rely on violence with an innocent victim like myself knowing nothing about your country, or your politics? I've just arrived here and violence doesn't pay." And they said, "Well, because the government won't listen to us." A lot of them were students also that were anti-government besides

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the ones who took Burke and some of them hadn't even met their leaders. Like Castros, there were lots of leaders in the mountains. They were just given orders. They had never met...So Burke spoke and said that these young people should be heard. And he kept his promise, and there has been very little terrorism since then [in Brazil].

Q: We had guards when we were there, too, but we didn't really feel that we needed them.

ELBRICK: I don't think we did after that.

Q: How about one of your happy posts. When did you go into the Service?

ELBRICK: 1934, Roosevelt was president then. We went to England and then we went to Haiti. I think of the Foreign Service as you, I am sure feel, all of us feel that it is the greatest education in the world. The children benefit much more by their travels, their languages, they meet foreigners, they know how the world ticks. They move around. They know what an African country is like compared to an Arab country. I believe the hardship posts are far more educational and more of a challenge to a couple and their family than Paris, London or Rome. It makes them more creative, more curious — the children — and self-reliant. They learn so much. Then they come back to America, and they are sort of misfits for a while, because they know Latin, they know Greek, and well, all those languages, the basic languages. A ride on a camel in Morocco or an elephant in India is quite exciting, compared perhaps...while I think the Smithsonian is wonderful, history, technology and all and the zoo, but I do think the advantages the children have to go on a safari and kill a tiger is quite a thrill. And to punch a button at the Louvre — we happened to be in Paris. We did go to London twice, Paris twice, and we were in Rome. But for a child to be taken to Notre Dame and be told they can punch a button and illuminate the buildings in Paris is quite exciting. My son did that...to light Paris.

Q: The City of Light. Were your children born abroad?

ELBRICK: No they were both born here.

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Q: So you went in 1934 by ship, I'm sure, with two little children and mounds of luggage too.

ELBRICK: We went to many countries which were invaded. We lost two homes in the War [WWII], but it was worth it, very interesting.

They were born in a crisis, usually, Poland was the crisis when [I came home to have my son]. And my daughter was born at the time of Pearl Harbor. I was in Portugal but I came out because America declared war. That's how they happened to be in the United States when they were born, not in foreign countries. But funny things happened if you want a little laughter after the terrorism [of Brazil].

Q: I think we need it.

ELBRICK: We were in Paris. We had just come from here. Burke had been Assistant Secretary of State and ordered to Paris to be with NATO. He was the deputy to that and I had my hats, I loved hats. I used to get them from Paris or Garfinckels, but usually they were French hats. So I called Security Storage — I knew Philip Gore who was the head of it, who has moved you and me and all the other Foreign Service families over and over again. I said, "Philip, I don't want the Sheraton furniture put in the liftvan first, but I want my hat boxes to be put in first," because I buy two very elegant — in those days, I don't know, maybe \$100 hats which today would be much more, and I wear them once and then put them back and then wear them...and I still have them. So I said, "Put them in the liftvan." We'd just arrived in Paris and our stuff had arrived — the luggage, trunks and the liftvan. So out came the crates of hats and we were invited to the American Embassy to a reception for Dean Acheson. We had arrived in the morning and went there that afternoon and the children said, "What hat are you going to wear, mommy?" And I said, "I don't know. Which one do you think you'd like your mother to wear to this party?" and they chose — together we chose — one with cock feathers, a very lovely thing with a cerise velvet ribbon in the back. A lovely hat — Susie in Paris that I'd bought at Garfinckels but

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from Susie. So I put it on my head and went up...the receiving line had broken up, and Dean Acheson was talking to Livingston Merchant. They were holding their martinis with olives — I mean an onion — in the glass and we laughed about something, and I shook my head as I laughed and out popped a mothball and landed in Dean Acheson's martini. I hadn't had time to take the mothballs out.

But in Haiti, while I was very, very young and our second post, and some fancy yacht came in. It was the Lambert yacht, friends of the Norman Armours, and they came to dinner at our house because young officers in those days helped to entertain the Minister's/Ambassador's house guests. So as we were only three in the American Legation in Port-au-Prince, I invited the Lamberts for dinner with the Armours. We were very new in the country and I couldn't speak the patois at all and I couldn't communicate with the cook very well, so I said, "We'd have first a clear soup, turtle soup — terrapin soup — and then put sherry in it." And then we'd have — they had marvelous fish in Haiti — so then the second course would be a baked fish, "...and to put some parsley in the fish's mouth, and that would be very pretty on the silver platter." So we sat down and looked at our terrapin soup and there were maraschino cherries floating up and down. And the cook, of course...I realized my mistake instantly as sherry and cherry sounded alike. But then the fish came in — of course, this made the dinner bounce like a tennis ball with laughter and it was a very successful meal, being very young, both of us we were a little bit intimidated with our boss and the Lambert — listerine Lamberts and the huge yacht that had come in that day. So the fish came in and we couldn't believe our eyes because the black butler had the parsley in his mouth and the fish didn't. So that was another laugh. It was one of the most successful dinners I ever had, I think. Twice in an evening.

Q: ...twice in an evening. Oh, wonderful.

ELBRICK: So those are some of the funny things, there's so many as you had, of course.

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Q: But no, those are two very good stories. Oh, your most outstanding experience you had?

ELBRICK: Oh. Another embarrassing moment was a luncheon. Burke was Assistant Secretary of State and we were mixed up with all these countries and I would have once a year the Secretary of State's wife for lunch — we lived not in this house but a smaller house because my parents were living here — so I had ten. It was for Mrs. Dulles and the French Ambassador's — not the French Ambassador's — Madame Alphand, but the Dutch, Mrs. van Roijen and I've forgotten who the group of European Ambassadors...we sat down and had a very nice lunch that I'd worked very hard to get together as we all do, and sweated it out first to make it all perfect. And we got to the dessert course and the telephone rang. My Portuguese maid — I had a Portuguese maid — went to the phone and came back...she knew enough not to ever disturb me especially on an occasion like this. She was impressed by the Secretary of State's wife, and Ambassador's wives at the table. But she said, "But you must go to the phone." So I did within earshot of Mrs. Dulles, the phone was in the hall near the dining room. It was the French Embassy. It was Madame Alphand who had invited me to a luncheon at the French embassy in my honor. And I was at my table, on Decatur Place in our tiny house with Mrs. Dulles as my guest. I said to the secretary, "Oh, how horrible. I've mixed up the dates and I have the Secretary of State's wife here.

I really don't know quite what to do." She said, "We've waited all this time," because their luncheon was at the same time as mine, and we were on the dessert course and they were still waiting for the guest of honor which was Elfie Elbrick. So I said, "Please apologize to Madame Alphand, and please go in to eat and I will come and have coffee. I don't know what else to do but it's the most embarrassing moment of my life." So I said to Mrs. Dulles — I repeated, relayed the message that I had had, and she said, "Of course, go." And I said, "Thank you. I don't know what else to do." So I said, "Will you have the

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coffee with the other ladies, and I will be at the French embassy.” Isn't that awful? I was really...that was the worst.

Q: But you did get over in time?

ELBRICK: I did, yes I did.

Q: And she had held lunch until then?

ELBRICK: They'd held lunch but they did go in, and I had coffee in the drawing room later with them.

Q: When you first came in the Service, did you drop cards at the White House?

ELBRICK: Yes, but that is all gone now.

Q: Were you invited to the White House?

ELBRICK: Oh, Yes, a lot. Actually, it was quite embarrassing because Burke was Assistant Secretary of State and my father was Chief of Naval Intelligence, a three star Admiral. Once we were invited to the White House to the same dinner and my father had to sit below the salt and below his daughter. That was uncomfortable.

Q: What was your maiden name?

ELBRICK: Elvira Johnson. I was the daughter of Alfred Johnson.

Q: What would you have done in a situation like that?

ELBRICK: It was not me.

Q: If you had been the hostess wouldn't you have kept that in mind?

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ELBRICK: No, it was protocol and perfectly correct. No, I wouldn't put the father above the daughter. The son-in-law was the Assistant Secretary of State and he was a three star Admiral, no. Admirals go way down and so do Generals and that was who you are.

Q: Did you actually have any dealings with Mrs. Roosevelt?

ELBRICK: No, no.

Q: It was because you were a junior officer's wife.

ELBRICK: I think this was Eisenhower's administration, I'm not sure — way later.

Q: ...just before...

ELBRICK: Burke was head of African affairs in Roosevelt's time. He went out for the forming of the United Nations, we were in San Francisco when Roosevelt died. And then he was followed by Truman. Burke was not in the elevated position in the State Department in Truman's day. But I think it was Eisenhower...Johnson appointed Burke to something, because he took Kennedy's place and Kennedy appointed Burke. Burke was appointed by Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Eisenhower — those four, not Roosevelt. But we were out there when he died, and an awful shock to everybody. That was the forming of the UN in San Francisco.

Q: Was that a long-term assignment or just a short-term assignment?

ELBRICK: No, it was just a three week assignment for everybody.

Q: That was history being made.

ELBRICK: Yes.

Q: So then you came back.

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ELBRICK: The poor United Nations today after all that. It hasn't worked out as they'd hoped. It did for a number of years.

Q: It did for a while.

ELBRICK: But then they brought in all the little countries like Mali, Tanzania and Africa broke up into all the different nations so they have the same vote as Russia, or France, or England or America. It's too bad in a sense.

Q: But it's still going. It's still functioning.

ELBRICK: It's still the same system as our Senators, say from Nevada or Montana...

Q: ...having the same vote as California.

ELBRICK: Yes, and New York, too. So perhaps it's correct to let them have a voice that's as strong as the big shots in the world, but it hasn't worked out. It looks as though it's not going too well.

Q: But you really had an interesting career because you were very involved. A great assortment of posts and really your husband was a high ranking...

ELBRICK: No, he was just lucky. He was in the right spot at the right time and war was declared and he was in Poland when it began. He was in Czechoslovakia when Hitler took over Czechoslovakia.

Q: Were you there when he...

ELBRICK: No, I was not in Czechoslovakia but I was in Poland and I was there when the war started. I was in Norway...hedge-hopping as soon as one country was occupied we'd go on to another. We lost two full homes and in France our house was looted — a chateau on the Noire which was requisitioned for the Polish government in exile and all

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the embassies which had been in Warsaw went to Angers, France before they went to London. France gave them refuge and so the diplomatic corps went to Angers along with the Polish government. The French Ambassador in his own country, which was very funny — the French Ambassador in Warsaw — was Ambassador to the exiled Poland in Angers. And that's where we were because we were part of the American Embassy that had been in Poland, in France. So they requisitioned chateaus, the mayor of Angers almost had a nervous breakdown because the French families in Paris who had their chateaus on the Loire would go to their summer homes — they'd send their domestic staffs in advance. There was one hotel, the Hotel Angers — a funny little rundown hotel — you had to share a bathroom down the hall with other members of the diplomatic corps in the government. It was just a small place where the servants would stay that opened the chateaus for their mistresses and masters. There were no hotels except this one little place where we went first and then the mayor requisitioned chateaus for this enormous mob of people. All these Ambassadors and their staffs and so we were given a seventeenth century chateau which was small but lovely and we lived there very happily for nine months. Most of the men had been requisitioned by the French government to...like the sausage man in our village. We lived out of Angers in a little village. There was a little cheese shop — you know France, how they all have the little stores — a tiny village the size of a thimble where our place was — but the sausage man disappeared, the cheese man disappeared, the chicken man disappeared, the meat man disappeared and went to the Maginot Line.

It was the phoney war, the Ziegfried Line, so all the men disappeared and the village was just full of women. And suddenly one day we saw this great string of...the phoney war seemed to be coming to an end, Germans and British were exchanging cigarettes across the Line, drinking beer together and suddenly it all went kaput and war came in earnest and France was bombed terribly. Angers happened to be on a railroad track with a station there — it was the vineyard country not so far from Bordeaux actually. Anyway we were given notice. We began to see streams of people day and night, all night long; women with baby carriages, automobiles, whatever means of conveyance was covered with branches

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of trees to camouflage, and empty baby carriages. Mothers had lost their children and they'd stop at our chateau that had an enormous driveway lined with poplar trees. We would ask them in, and feed them, and they slept on blankets out on the lawns. We gave them food and they described the child that they'd lost — young children, school children were all on the road trying to get out. They were coming from the cities trying to get to any little country village if they could, away from danger. So that passed but, of course, we weren't in the war, this was the year before America got in the war. We entered in '41.

But anyway we were in the middle of it and suddenly they started bombing Angers like mad. So Burke called from his office in Angers to our little village and said to put blankets and food in the car and he would come and get me and drive to Bordeaux and said, "You've got to get the hell out of France and go to Spain or go to Portugal and I will take you to Bordeaux but I have to return to burn the archives in our chancery," because Biddle (Tommy Biddle was our Ambassador in Poland) and he had fled and Burke was left alone. It was a very tiny staff, it was whittled down to three. Biddle wanted Burke to remain but get his family out as far as Bordeaux and then we had to fend for ourselves. So we went with our food and pillows and Bordeaux was packed with everything you can imagine. There were eleven hotels, they were all packed, and Burke went in first, in the darkness...

Oh, I forgot to say a bridge was bombed that we were on but we were on the right side and got off. The bomb hit behind and the bridge fell but we were on the side towards Bordeaux so we were all right. Burke went to eleven hotels and the British and the Germans were bombing Bordeaux. He went to this hotel, and as I say, it was packed, there were eleven members of the Air Ministry from Paris that were going to occupy this...early, early in the morning we left Miss Jennings and the baby, a little boy not yet two, asleep in this room — I had traveler's checks, plenty of money. And Burke turned around and I said, "Well, how do I get out of here, how are we going to get out of here. You promised that we would be out by 6:30 in the morning..." and it was 2:00 in the morning. Exhausted! But we did have a bed — two beds and one for the child, a crib. But we had to evacuate and so I went out on the street, and Miss Jennings with the baby. We had one suitcase each and condensed

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milk for the child — that was the main thing that we took — food for the baby. So I went out and I saw a limousine and a handle-bar moustached chauffeur looking at the dog fights — these aeroplanes dropping bombs — and I said, “Can you take me across the bridge at Hendaye, I don't know but I think I want to go to Lisbon, and not to Spain,” because they were recovering from a civil war and food was short and they didn't want any more traffic of foreigners — Americans.

Q: Where was your husband at this point?

ELBRICK: He had gone back to Angers. So then this man, the chauffeur, the family had gone on with other cars or whatever they could get to get out and he had no petrol, no benzene. I said, “I'll pay you anything to take me to the bridge and if you can, take me to Portugal.”

And he said, “I can only go as far as the bridge because I haven't got a passport to go into Portugal, and I haven't any money, and I haven't any benzene.” So then he thought, and he said, “There is a garden not far from here where a French family buried their tins of gasoline in the garden as a reserve...” which they had used I suppose to go on. Everybody was leaving Bordeaux, and he was stuck with no gasoline but he remembered. So he went and came back shortly and filled the tank and off we went.

I noticed there were two glass vases — an old-fashioned limousine — we didn't even have time to go to the bathroom and we had had a lot of coffee. So Miss Jennings said, “I've got to go to the bathroom.” We were whizzing to get us out as fast as possible and snaking our way too because it was bumper to bumper and very hair-raising and so many people and she said, “I can't go to the bathroom, so many people, I can't go to the bathroom behind a tree.” I said, “Take the vase.” And Miss Jennings said, “I couldn't possibly straddle a crystal fluted vase.” And I said, “Yes, you can. In wartime you can do anything.” And I said, “I'll show you.” And that's when I learned never to wear a girdle and I have never worn one since because you can do anything in a receptacle if you have to. And that's how we went,

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but he dropped us at the bridge and we walked over with all the French, and all the Dutch, and all the Norwegians, and all the countries that had been invaded by the Germans. It was some trip, I'll tell you.

Q: Where did you meet your husband again?

ELBRICK: I didn't for about three months. We were stuck, we were separated and we couldn't get in touch. We didn't know where we were and finally I got a message from him. We went to Lisbon and we got a train and happily, as I say, I had lots of traveler's checks and that was great. We went to Estoril and stayed in a hotel and then Burke had left Angers sometime before and went to the frontier to help as many refugees as he could — Americans and an awful lot of Poles, people that we knew personally that were fleeing with their children.

Q: That's when they were getting them out through France.

ELBRICK: Yes, to Spain. The bridge at Hendaye, that was the famous bridge that everybody crossed to go on to Spain and Portugal. So he was there helping them and on a little blue envelope he scribbled, "I'm all right. Don't worry. I'm on the frontier of Spain and France and I'll be in touch with you." That was my first message in three months. (End of Tape 1)

Well, it's sort of grasshoppering conversation, a cricket conversation [jumping from post to post].

Q: Right. But as you say, you're mixing up the happy with the sad and the humor.

ELBRICK: I think when you read a book...I haven't worked on this at all, I'm ashamed to say. I should have. I had intended to put something down on a piece of paper and things have been happening in the family. So I should have really thought more about it, I really

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should have because I think it makes it easier for you and it will probably sound very garbled without being organized. I think you should say, "Be organized."

Q: There's a spontaneity to it.

ELBRICK: Who else have you interviewed?

Q: I've interviewed Frances Dixon. I don't know if you know her. Her husband was Consul General in Tangier when we were in Morocco.

ELBRICK: Then you've been in Brazil and Morocco.

Q: You were in Rabat or Tangier?

ELBRICK: No, Tangier.

Q: Tell me about Tangier. When were you there?

ELBRICK: You were in Rabat?

Q: We were in Rabat because by that time Rabat was the capital. Henry Tasca was there when we were there.

ELBRICK: Oh, Henry Tasca. I hardly know him but I remember the name — a tisket, a tasket, a nursery rhyme.

Q: A tisket, a tasket — something about a yellow basket. He, unfortunately was killed in an automobile accident some years ago. But we used to just dearly love... Well, my children went to school in Tangier because the American school of Tangier...

ELBRICK: I had no children [there], I left them here because I had my last child at Pearl Harbor time and I was 18 months trying to get back to Morocco where Burke had been transferred — to Tangier. He was there almost two years before I got there because Mrs.

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Shiple — Shipley, I think her name was — wouldn't give me a passport. [Mrs. Ruth B. Shipley was appointed chief of the Passport Division in 1928 and retired April 30, 1955. Tales of her autocratic rule are legion, and tend to recount delayed or withheld passports.] And I couldn't bear her because I was stuck. My child was 18 months old by the time I...I wasn't going to take the child, but she was here with her older brother. But Burke had been there so long and here it was a year and a half that I'd been cooling my heels and Shipley — I always get it mixed up — but anyway, I liked her in the end very, very much. But she wouldn't let me go and she was holding up a lot of wives, I wasn't the only one, because Gibraltar was nearby and the Straits of Gibraltar were mined at that time and I could hear from our house — do you remember Tangier was sort of built on a mountain? We were on that cliff overlooking the Straits of Gibraltar. I could see dimly convoys going and then “boom”. I couldn't see the water...an artesian well, a fountain-like thing from the mine but I could hear the sound. They'd blow up the ships going through the Straits. So I think that was why they feared maybe. We were fairly close to convoys of ships. It was sort of in a sense a little bit of war but not much.

Q: So she finally relented and let you go.

ELBRICK: So finally she let me go. I said, “Look, I've been in Poland, I've been in Norway, I've been in France, all these places and bombings all over the place. I think I can take care of myself. I've got through other things worse.” Finally she allowed me to go and then two months later — I was there three months actually — and Burke was transferred to the State Department. But I did have a glimpse of Morocco and traveled quite a lot.

Q: And Tangier was sort of a center of intrigue at that time too, wasn't it?

ELBRICK: Yes, it was. It was sort of the way Lisbon was during the war. It was just packed.

Q: Packed with Germans there trying to find out things.

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ELBRICK: Little dark alleys at night where you'd meet people — I didn't, but Burke did. But your children went to the American school?

Q: ...of Tangier, yes. One of them went there for three years and the other one went for two. I think it still is one of the better American schools abroad because when they came back my son went to prep school in Massachusetts and my daughter went to university from there, and they both said going to school here was nothing new because the Tangier school was so great. So they did have a good education. After Tangier they always stayed here.

Q: But you have a lot of memories and contacts and things in Washington.

ELBRICK: Yes, school days here, debut and weddings. This house has had two weddings — starting with two babies, two weddings, two baptisms and two funerals.

Q: How long have you lived in this house?

ELBRICK: I've only lived here during my growing up years and then we'd come back always to this house from abroad and stayed with my parents when they lived here and when they died we moved in.

Q: Isn't it nice to always have a home to come back to? I feel we have been very lucky that way because...in Santa Barbara, not in Washington. We always went to Santa Barbara on home leave.

ELBRICK: Was that your parent's house?

Q: It was my husband's mother's house and my children always had a grandmother to come home to. Roots, exactly, and I think that makes a difference.

ELBRICK: I remember my father saying years ago, "And where is your home?" Somebody spoke to a Navy child and said, "Where is your home?" "I have no home." So father said

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he'd never have that happen in his family and he'd always keep this house as roots and our heritage. This is five generations and in upstate New York I have my mother's home, in Gilbertsville, New York, which is near Cooperstown and that's ten generations. So it's quite long.

Q: Is that house still in the family?

ELBRICK: Yes.

Q: Isn't that wonderful.

ELBRICK: So that's where we'd go in the summer when we were here. It's on the National Register as being one of the most unique villages. It's built by my mother's — Gilbert was the family name, and it's named Gilbertsville. It was a grant of land way back and they settled there. It's seven hours by car from Washington, it's hell to get there, but it's a sweet little place, a darling little village — only 450 people and they're dying out — these big estates now — the children don't want them, can't get the servants. They used to be run with — some of them had 22 gardeners. We didn't, we lived much more simply. I didn't come from a rich family, at all. My mother's family was from Albany and they went to Gilbertsville in the summer. It was a grant of land and my great-great grandfather loved it and thought it reminded him of England and James Fenimore Cooper — Cooperstown is nearby, Indian country — Iroquois, Mohawks too.

You really ought to talk to Mrs. Lane [Cornelia Baldwin Lane]. You know she is nearly 95 but as clear as can be. She was born in Florence and married Arthur Bliss Lane. She has lived all over South America but her father was an American but lived in Florence and she was born there. [The Interviewer found her session with Mrs. Lane, who was 95 at the time, not entirely successful.]

Q: Were they Foreign Service?

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ELBRICK: Foreign Service, all the way through — I mean her husband, Arthur Bliss Lane.

Q: Is that the Bliss family from Dunbarton?

ELBRICK: I don't know whether she's related to them or not. But Arthur Lane was Ambassador to Poland and many countries. He wrote a book called *I Saw Poland Betrayed*, and Burke served with him. She lives on Massachusetts Avenue up here near the Japanese Embassy in a little house. She is well up in years.

Q: And she really is in her nineties?

ELBRICK: Yes, and perfectly lovely. She is like an older sister to me, I adore her. She has had some rather interesting experiences. Her name was Cornelia Baldwin and then she married Arthur Bliss Lane. She'd talk a lot to you about...she's sort of like Loy Henderson, the mother of the Foreign Service. She has lived in a lot of countries, a lot in South America — Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay — a lot of countries, mostly South America and Mexico.

Q: ...because if she's 95 that would make her experiences in the Foreign Service start before...

ELBRICK: She was in Yugoslavia where we were. Yugoslavia was fascinating — I'll get started on Tito. Oh, there's so much. I think we ought to have a second session. I could go on and on. I haven't even started. No, I talked too much about things that I shouldn't have talked about. France, and the looting of our place and what they did to our sheep, and what they did to my clothes in Angers before we went to Bordeaux and Portugal when France collapsed. That's a story in itself, what happened to our possessions that were taken by the Germans. Just terrible.

Q: How many times have you lost households?

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ELBRICK: Twice. And Warsaw, and the Gestapo went into our home. It was shaved off and I have some tables and rugs — the table with shrapnel. The most amazing things happened before the war in Warsaw in our home and just those countries alone would take an awful lot of time. I haven't even begun to tell you. When you said the kidnaping, that's quite different. Yugoslavia was fascinating.

Q: And of course, Tito was in full power when you were there.

ELBRICK: He lived across the street from us and Averell Harriman used to come and see him — they were great friends and stayed with us a lot of times. Oh, Yugoslavia is just a book in itself, fascinating.

Q: Have you ever thought of writing your memoirs?

ELBRICK: Oh I think of the letters and things like that that I wrote to my family which I have.

Q: Did you save all of those?

ELBRICK: I didn't, my father did. I wouldn't read through them, they were all long-winded letters. But don't you think every Foreign Service family has had...Elizabeth Cabot had 19 posts, interesting.

Q: But the Service is changed. I mean the experiences, your war-time experiences...

ELBRICK: I mean Poland in the war, France in the war. Just that in itself and then Yugoslavia...we went with Averell Harriman and his wife to Brioni where Tito had lived — three islands and I'll be quick about this. The third one which was his Shangri-la. Even his own henchmen had never seen it. It was just the most amazing experience to see Harriman and Tito, the communist and the capitalist, who were intimate friends. They'd met in Moscow. So that's how we went to Brioni and Brioni was just something that I could

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write a book about. Just that one day and night in Brioni with Tito and his wife, Averell Harriman and his wife, and Burke and myself. The most fascinating island that you would ever believe.

Q: Was this an official meeting or did he just take you?

ELBRICK: No, it was all unofficial, it wasn't planned because they were friends. But as we were leaving — he had a big dog, Tiger, an Alsatian, it was Tiger No. 3. The first dog jumped on his shoulders when Tito was in a cave and he was slaughtered during the war, the dog was shot and Tito adored this animal — a police dog. So he always had from then on a police dog so this was Tiger No. 3. And as we were leaving, I patted the dog because I love animals — dogs, especially — and the dog made a lunge at me and so without thinking — I always speak before I think, I'm not organized, as you can see in thought — I said, "Oh, Tiger obviously doesn't like capitalists, Mr. Marshall," because he scared me to death, this dog with his fangs and so I withdrew quickly. And in a flash that man, Tito, took me by the arm and said, "Well, Tiger knows the difference between capitalists and communists, and we both lean towards the west." I mean he just came out with that. He was scared of Russia and was groomed in Russia and he was a communist and then he ended by saying, "The Soviet Ambassador was here last week..." — not on this particular island — he had two others, one for state visits and one for Ambassadors, and this was his own private place. He said the Soviet Ambassador was on island No. 1 for an official visit and Tiger made a lunge at him and almost took his arm off to sort of let me know that the dog and he were...he was in a very subtle way trying to let Harriman and Burke and myself, and Mrs. Harriman, know that he was much more inclined towards America than he was to the Soviet Union. But his dog did not take my arm off, but he almost...End of Tape

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

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Spouse: C. Burke Elbrick

Spouse entered Service: 1932 Left Service: c. 1975

Posts: 1934Port au Prince, Haiti 1937Warsaw, Poland 1938Prague, Czechoslovakia
1939Bucharest, Romania 1939Angers, France 1940Madrid, Spain 1940Lisbon, Portugal
1942Washington, DC 1943Tangier, Morocco 1944Washington, DC 1945Warsaw, Poland
1946Washington, DC 1949Havana, Cuba 1951London, England 1952Paris, France
1953Washington, DC 1958Lisbon, Portugal 1960sBelgrade, Yugoslavia 1971Rio de
Janeiro, Brazil

Status: Widow of FSO (Ambassador)

Date and place of birth: January 10, 1910, Annapolis, Maryland

Maiden name: Elvira Johnson

Parents:

Admiral Alfred W. Johnson (3rd generation Navy)

Hannah Gilbert Harris

Eastman Johnson, great uncle

Schools: Madeira School, also educated abroad in Panama, Chile, England, China, Japan,
Philippines, Hawaii, Nicaragua

Date and place of marriage: July 27, 1932; St. Matthew's, Washington, DC

Honors: Woman's Knight of Malta, Cross of Portugal (awarded to foreigners)

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End of interview